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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of an ethnographic study that analyzed the constraining and enabling dynamics of parental involvement in schools. The study was conducted at a suburban, an urban, and a rural high school, but the paper reports only the results from the suburban and urban schools. Data were derived from interviews with a total of 98 teachers and 52 parents, document analysis, and observations. Findings indicate that the degree and nature of parental involvement differ drastically between schools and within schools. Parents may be involved in many ways, including through "silent" encouragement at home of their children's educational activities. A high level of parental involvement does not always indicate positive relationships between parents and educators; sometimes school-community relations are difficult or strained. Parent participation at each of the two schools was largely influenced by whether parents felt a sense of ownership. In addition, the level and nature of parent involvement is context-specific; parent communities differ even though they may share a similar socioeconomic and racial background. Finally, educators should differentiate between long-term and short-term goals in order to improve parent involvement. Short-term goals might include providing parent meeting space, introducing voice-mail communications, or scheduling events to fit parents' schedules. Long-term goals pertain to strengthening school-community ties, including collaborative partnerships and assessment of the school role. (Contains 62 references.) (LMI)

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Parental Involvement in School: In Search for Socially Situated Understanding[1]

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PURPOSE OF STUDY/OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to portray some of the major findings of an ethnographic study of parental involvement in a south eastern metropolitan area. The main objective of the study was to analyze from a sociocultural perspective the complex dynamics creating and perpetuating both enablers and barriers to parental involvement. It was the author's intent to bring to life--and to analyze and interpret--the implications of various forms of school-community relations, expectations and interpretations of parent involvement, grounded in ethnographic data collected in one urban, one suburban, and one rural school. Findings derived from two cases--rather than all three--will be discussed in this paper. The intent of the study was to sensitize educators, parents, and policy makers alike to the complexities of the issue involved and to offer ways of understanding and improving parent involvement in schools.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY/RATIONALE

Based on qualitative case studies of high schools in a southeastern metropolitan area, this study discusses central questions relating to parent involvement in schools, an issue

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EA 027 581

which attracts considerable attention in current educational debates: it is one of the "Goals 2000," and generally focused upon by school reformers, policy makers, educators, and others. Research over the past several decades has shown that involving parents in the process of educating their children provides substantial advantages for their education (e.g., Stevenson and Baker, 1987; Henderson, 1987; Moles, 1982; et. al.). Many scholars have argued, furthermore, that parents' voices in school matters are a crucial component of an educational system in a democratic society (Fine, 1993). In a representative statement, Rebecca Crawford Burns summarizes the literature on the benefits of parent involvement to the educational process as follows:

> Meaningful parent involvement results in improved student achievement, attendance, motivation, self-esteem, and behavior. Parent involvement also is a major contributor to children's positive attitude toward school and teachers. Indeed, the more parents are involved, the more children benefit (Burns, 1993, p. 9).

And yet, there is also evidence that powerful barriers oftentimes prevent or limit parental involvement (Carrasquillo/London, 1993; Kelley, 1990). These barriers can only be tackled once we better understand the multiple faces and various interpretations of the nature of parent involvement in school. What, in other words, do we mean when we talk about--or call for--parent involvement in schools? What are the complex and socially situated dynamics that either foster or prevent different types of parent involvement? What meaning(s) does and should parent involvement have in a democratic society?

Most of the literature on parent involvement in school is

quantitative in nature, seeking to explain how parent involvement correlates with parents differing along the lines of race, socioeconomic status, etc. Yet another strong focus in the literature is on programs that help parents get involved in school. The study upon which this paper is based was intended to complement the literature providing an in-depth look at the dynamic relationships between schools and parents. Questions pertaining not only to the degree but also the nature of parent involvement are raised. This study does not only describe who is involved and in what ways, but also how parent involvement is interpreted and judged by school personnel and other parents. First-hand accounts of those parents who are labeled by school personnel as being uninvolved in school, furthermore, shed some light on their situations, on their attitudes toward school and education in general. It is important to listen to these voices rarely included in the literature in order to learn from these individuals directly as to why they are (perceived as) uninvolved in the schooling of their children.

Furthermore, while qualitative studies do not have the breadth and generalizability of quantitative studies, the premise of this study is that much can be learned from in-depth studies of cases which may be unique in many ways, and yet nevertheless teach lessons and provide challenging questions to educators and parents generally.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA SOURCES

This study combines quantitative and qualitative components. A brief initial written survey was used to indicate the general degree and nature of parental involvement at the schools. Teachers and administrators were asked to rate the level of parental involvement at their school, and to give reasons as to why they think parental involvement is the way they see it to be. They were also asked to nominate potential participants for the study. The survey, in other words, was used as an indicator of how school personnel rated parental involvement at their school.

This study involves three high schools in a southeastern metropolitan area which differ significantly in regard to location, resources, as well as racial makeup and socioeconomic status of the communities they serve. One suburban school serves a middle to upper middle class, predominantly White community, one inner-city school serves mainly working class and poor, predominantly African-American communities (among them six high-crime project areas), and one school serves a rural community that is racially mixed and lower middle to middle class.

The most appropriate methods of data collection for this study consist of:

- in-depth, open-ended interviews with a diverse body of participants who provide multiple perspectives on the issue (parents, teachers, administrators, students,

etc.) using an interview guide as framework;

- analysis of documents pertaining to parental involvement in schools, for instance: school policies, project proposals/descriptions pertaining to the enhancement of parental involvement in schools, etc.;
- observations of PTA meetings and other events of teacher-parent contact.

The validity of the study is enhanced by triangulation of methods, researchers, and participants. Furthermore, preliminary findings of this study were shared and discussed with participants whose reactions further refined the final analysis of the data.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS:

Participants for this study were selected in a variety of ways:

1. criterion-based sampling: survey to school personnel asking nominations of parents and teachers on the basis of 3 categories:
   a. teachers who have unique experience dealing with parental involvement because they have, for instance, introduced innovative techniques to encourage parental involvement)
   b. parents who are highly involved in school
   c. parents who seem to perceive barriers to school involvement

2. snowball sampling (participants refer to potential participants)

Accessibility of participants varied greatly. Teachers and school staff members were generally highly accessible and willing to grant interviews. They were, however, oftentimes restricted in time. Parents who had been nominated as "involved" were both willing to grant interviews an to talk at length. It was very difficult, finally, to get in contact with parents who seem to perceive barriers to parental involvement. School personnel, as well as other parents, were reluctant to nominate them or make referrals. In one case no names of "uninvolved" parents were given to the researchers. In other cases, "uninvolved" parents lived in communities inaccessible to the researchers for safety reasons, or did not show to interview appointments, or could not be contacted by telephone. A total number of 98 teachers/staff members were surveyed, and 52 interviews conducted (3 interviews were conducted by phone).

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Prior to the interview, the participant was informed about the nature and objectives of the project, and asked for written consent to participate in the study. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured in nature, conducted on the basis of an interview guide. While the interview guide was used to ensure that all relevant questions were being asked, participants nevertheless influenced both the length and the nature of the

conversations considerably. They participated actively in structuring the interview, determining topical emphasis, etc. Almost all interviews were tape recorded after permission had been obtained from participants. They were transcribed verbatim. Detailed fieldnotes were taken in order to record the settings in general, and observations of significant events in particular.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

It should be noted that while the study provides an in-depth analysis of parental involvement at three different schools, it is not generalizable, i.e. not based on a representative sample of the population. The author's concern in portraying the findings focused on validity, not statistical reliability. Findings are based on what promises to capture the "essence" of the experiences of parents with teachers and teachers with parents at the three schools. At the same time, "untypical" experiences also find representation. The author is confident that the cases portray attitudes and behaviors that are widespread at all three schools. And yet, it cannot be claimed that the study is exhaustive or captures all perspectives present at the schools studied. Time and resource constraints simply did not allow for that.

In some cases the small sample of a particular "type" of participants is a concern. Parents who were nominated as "uninvolved," in particular, are represented only in small numbers. Time constraints simply did not allow the researcher to

extend the labor intense process of contacting "uninvolved" parents, thus enlarging the pool of participants in the study. More research ought to be conducted dealing with the perspectives of these parents specifically.

FINDINGS

Parent involvement, it was found, has multiple meanings even within one school community, and certainly when compared across settings. The topic thus raises much broader questions than merely "how do we get parents to help with homework or attend PTA meetings?"

Issues of cultural identity and school ownership, of community-school relations, of teachers as professionals, class and racial divisions within communities and schools, effects of desegregation, as well as perceptions of the meaning of schooling in general surfaced in the course of this study of parental involvement in schools. And some issues are much more significant at some schools than at others.

It became obvious that parent involvement is interpreted very differently by different groups of parents ranging from silent support of school work over visible involvement in school related activities to active participation in school governance and policy making.

It is important to note that what might be one's initial connotation with the term parental involvement--meaning parents supporting athletic boosters, showing up at basketball games and

PTA meetings--are not the only forms of parental involvement. Important is also "silent" parental involvement at home, parents making sure that students do their school work, etc.

The involvement of many parents also changes--in both degree and nature--over time. Parents may report to have been actively and visibly involved in their children's elementary classroom. By the time their children reach high school their involvement may have changed to invisibly and silently providing conditions at home that are conducive to their children's education.

The realization that parental involvement often changes over time, however, is not the same thing as saying that the reason that we have differing degrees of parental involvement in schools is that parents stop being involved as their children grow older. That parental involvement naturally declines over time, that students do not want their parents to be involved any longer once they get older, or that parents do not see the need of being involved once their children reach middle or high school age seems to be a widespread taken-for-granted belief. It is suggested that assumptions of this kind be taken with a grain of salt.

Participants in my study questioned that belief and pointed out that high school students--especially those who are successful--generally want their parents to be involved. As the teacher voices reveal:

> "I don't think kids are embarrassed having their parents participate. In my situation, I have two grown daughters. I was involved . . . and they wanted me involved. I think most students want their parents to come to school and be

involved." (Teacher B4)

> "Some of the teachers will tell you it is true [that kids do not wish their parents to be involved]] because some of the children don't. But those are the kids who are ashamed of what they are doing. . . . I worked with cheerleaders . . . they want you to know who their parents are. They want it. They don't get it." (Teacher C6)

A former student of City High remembers:

> "I always wanted my mother to come and participate, but she just never had the time. I don't think we are embarrassed. I think a lot of kids would want their parents involved, you may want to do better.

Findings of this kind suggest that there is not much validity to this notion that parental involvement is merely a function of time. It seems more accurate to say that involved parents change the nature and perhaps level of involvement, whereas other parents are not involved at any level, including the elementary level. There are reasons for this phenomenon, and we cannot afford to ignore these reasons and simply say "Oh, well, parent involvement declines because kids don't want their parents involved."

After all, numerous elementary schools show virtually no visible parental involvement, while a tremendous degree of parental involvement of all types exists at many high schools, one of which became part of this study. The challenging task is to explain variations in the nature and degree of parental involvement of different groups and at different schools.

It is for those reasons that a case study approach for this particular topic and project seems adequate. Comparing settings as well as parents within each setting yields many insights.

It became obvious, for instance, that a high level of parental involvement in school does not necessarily mean that the school-community relations are perceived by the participants to be positive and productive. Let us look at Case 1, Suburban High School (a pseudonym).

Suburban High is located in a relatively wealthy suburb, serving a middle to upper middle class community and considered one of the best schools in the metropolitan area. It is a successful school by academic standards, and--as our initial survey revealed--parents participate in school in different ways and large numbers. Using Joyce Epstein's typology of different kinds of parent involvement, one can see that at Suburban High parents are involved in all sorts of ways. The school, for instance, has an incredibly large and active PTA, parents very supportive of extracurricular activities, supportive of their children's education at home, they are strong advocates, etc. [2] Much is well at Suburban High, in other words. And yet, as mentioned before, a high degree of parental involvement does not mean that the relations between schools and parents are seen as productive by those involved in shaping them.

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[2] By far the most systematic effort to define parent involvement has been that of Joyce Epstein (Epstein, 1992; 1988; 1987a; 1987b). To explain the complexity and diversity of parent involvement, Epstein draws on her own extensive research and a review of the available literature to establish a **typology of parent involvement** that divides parent involvement into six separate types. (For another typology of parent involvement, and cognitive/intellectual involvement, see Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994. For a good discussion of typologies of parent involvement in the United States and Great Britain, generally, see David, 1993).

At Suburban High, parents' and teachers' definitions of "good" parental involvement do not always match. What some parents regard as legitimate participation is seen as intrusion by teachers and administrators, for instance. At Suburban High, teachers and staff members frequently mention the undue amount of pressure parents exert on both students and teachers--at a school that sends about 82 percent of its graduates on to four-year college programs, and is known for its academically demanding and successful curriculum.

Many teachers, however, feel that parents are too concerned about grades, and push their kids too hard. The teachers' definition of what constitutes "good" parental involvement centers around the questions: "What can parents do to help us educators? What can they do to support their children" Some parents, on the other hand, define "good" parental involvement differently. They would like to see more parental influence on the school's decision making processes.

And yet it is important to note that parents are not at all a monolithic block. Some are offended by other parents who are too vocal, in their opinion. One mother described how teachers--in reaction to these overbearing parents--develop attitudes toward all parents in general that constitute barriers to parental involvement. According to her so called "overinvolvement" of selected parents not only alienates other parents but also causes teachers to display a rather "cool, and professional" attitude toward parents in general, whether they in

fact are "overinvolved" or not. She describes this cycle as follows:

> "All those PTA meetings, and you feel like, I've never seen a bigger group of snobs in all my life. And they do control the teachers, and they make plans for the teachers. . . . I think it's a handful of the super rich . . . .that get really, really, really involved . . . . And they try to tell the teachers because they're so rich, and they're so smart, they try to tell the teachers, who feel they're smart, how to handle their business, and how to handle their kids, and all this other stuff. It's very confusing for both parties, I'm sure. . . . It's very confrontational. You just walk in, and I feel intimidated immediately. Just by their, you know, the school. And I thought the South was supposed to be friendly." . . . . As long as this area is so wealthy, like I said, the rich trying to control the teachers. I kind of feel sorry for the teachers, and at the same time I'm still kind of pissed off at the teachers for the way they treated my kids in the past. But I understand why they take that position because they're used to dealing with these rich [. . .] over there. And then I go in, Joe Schmo, middle of the road type of person. They're ready for a fight." (Parent C7/8/11)

Several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Not merely the tensions between educators and parents shape parental involvement but also relations and tensions within the parent community.
2. A high degree of parental involvement in school--and a generally academically successful school--do not automatically mean that school-community relations are perceived as positive and productive by all those involved.

   Rather, issues of who defines the professional sphere of educators, of control over education, and how to democratically run a school lurk here and wait to be tackled.

Turning attention to Case 2, it should be noted that when the author inquired about the problem of parental overinvolvement at that school, one participant told me, that that is just simply not the problem. The problem is, according to her, that parents are--for the most part--not involved at all.

The school which is called City High (a pseudonym) is 98% African American, 1% Caucasian, 1% Hispanic. It is located in a high crime area, drawing on seven housing projects, and plagued by the typical problems of today's inner-city public schools: student absenteeism and dropout, general community deterioration, violence, and all the other effects of poverty, lack of opportunity, and racial discrimination.

Teachers and staff at City High school tend to approach the problem of lacking parental involvement based on the assumption that parents are kept away from school due to their overwhelming day-to-day struggles. They routinely mentioned poverty, drugs, teenage pregnancy, abuse, working long hours and several jobs as barriers to parental involvement.

It can be assumed that City High educators are generally right in their assumption that much of the time and energy of their parents are absorbed in daily survival struggles, and not much is left to spent on matters pertaining to schooling. And yet, we do not really know. Many of the parents who struggle the hardest are virtually invisible and unreachable. Schools frequently do not have updated phone numbers, phones are cut off, people do not have transportation or live in neighborhoods unsafe

to live in and unsafe to visit. The researcher was able to talk to only one woman in person who clearly fit the image of being simply too overwhelmed by daily survival struggles to get involved in school. Consequently, it needs to be assumed for the time being that the community's socio-economic problems are certainly an important factor explaining low parental involvement at City High. Data of this study, however, although limited at this point, suggests some additional insights.

First of all, not all parents of City High school students are in the situation of having to struggle for their day-to-day survival. Participants in this study did not get visibly involved in school although they do not seem to face severe economic hardships or family problems. This suggests that there are additional reasons for the lack of parental involvement at City High. Reasons are not confined to parents being preoccupied with making it from day to day, as City High educators suggest. It is submitted that there exist additional strains or a so-called chasm between the school and the communities it serves.

How, then, did such a chasm come into existence, and how is it perpetuated? One factor to consider is that poor social conditions of the community have "spilled over" into the school and rendered it a problematic place to learn--for all students, including those who do not come from problem ridden homes and for those who are doing well academically.

The following is a quote of a current City High student who is doing very well academically, and yet displays frustration

with and lack of enthusiasm for her school. She said:

> "Personally, I don't like high school anymore. Like the area that my school is in, we've had problems recently, and the problems seem to be worse. We've had violence in our school from outside on the street and stuff, and it's like nobody's willing to help." (Student M 8)

Above and beyond the effects of immediate social problems such as crime, drugs, and poverty in the community, it appears that many parents simply have given up on public schooling. At least, it seems safe to say, they have given up on the institution of public schooling as they witness it in an inner-city context. They do not perceive the school as a viable vehicle to provide their children with a chance at future economic stability. They do not see it as a tool instrumental in helping their children "make it" once they graduate. As one parent said:

> "You've got your average parents there at this particular time who have lost faith in the school system. If they could afford it they'd put their children in the private schools, and those who can afford to put their kids in private schools do it." (Parent X10)

Some parents feel betrayed by the school system, and City High as its representation. They do not trust teachers or administrators. In effect, they blame the school for their children's failures. Even in the cases in which their children are doing well academically, some parents perceive teachers as belonging to another class--distant, unapproachable, and alienated from their communities.

The following quotes illustrate these sentiments. One father said:

> "It's just like you could use my son because he could play music, and they really aren't concerned about his education, it was just for the playing, they'll use him and when they're through, when the class or the schedule is over for the end of the year, or he graduates whether he has an education or not, 'Hey, you're out, don't come back.' A football player, basketball player, it's the same thing, they use you and they put you out." (Father T3)

> "I don't see that the school is teaching my kids the education that they're going to need after they get out of school. . . . They're not measuring up, and they're not going to be able to make it." (Father T26)

His wife elaborated:

> "They [the school] kept on lying to us. That's what I hate, that's what I hate with a vengeance. They lied to my child . . . . they promised him all these things, and then when he graduates, he is out there to hang up to dry. There's no one to help him." (Mother T20)

Other parents shared this obvious sense of distrust in and disappointment with the school:

> "Teachers don't communicate, I don't even think they care." (Parent Y1)

> "It's like they [school personnel] don't care. . . . They don't know what's going on. . . . They don't work together." (Parent Z1)

> "Teachers show a lack of sincerity at conferences. They are just interested in their paycheck. And those kids can pick up that insincerity in a heartbeat. . . . They talk to you even if they don't mean it. . . . I have been the one who has to call the school. Every time I called that was no help. And then we had to go over there, it was a song-and-dance. Negative attitude, child is failing anyway, you gotta keep going and calling and going and calling." (Y1/2)

> "Their [the teachers'] education brings a big head, they think they know more about the child's problems than the parents know. . . . So last time we go to school they looked down on us, ... they look at us as not really knowing what we're doing." (Father T7/18)

What, then, does all of this mean? It can be seen here what Michelle Fine has described as parents and teachers acting as adversaries, fighting over inadequate resources and control (Fine 1993:684), in a system that does not serve its students well. Something else becomes visible here. Several studies--and among them John Ogbu's work (Ogbu, 1990)--have demonstrated that perceptions/assumptions concerning the value of education as a means of upward mobility are important determinants of students' academic motivation, and consequently academic performance. Findings in this study indicate that the same applies to parents. Their involvement in school is low when they do not perceive schools to provide their children with the tools for upward social mobility. Decisions on the part of parents to become involved with the schooling of their children, in whatever form, seem directly related to whether parents believe that education would "pay off" for their children, whether their particular school could be "trusted" in providing a useful education, and whether parents feel a sense of what I call ownership or proprietorship toward the school.

The resulting general inclination among parents "to give up," furthermore, seems to be shared and reflected not only by students, but even by educators themselves.

As a former City High student explains:

> "I think we are accepting the failure. The kids just don't want to learn. It is all on ourselves. I don't think we have the motivation." (Former student/teacher I, 3/4)

A teacher's assessment:

> "I think some of these students are so used to failure that they expect it." (Teacher B5)

In short, parental involvement at City High school is low for qualitatively different reasons: clearly, the economic and social struggles of many families represent one basic cause. According to the interviews for this project, however, there is at least one other major obstacle in place, namely the lack of a meaningful relationship between schools and the communities they serve.

Given this context, however, it should not be forgotten that there are parents involved at City High, and there are efforts made by teachers and staff to get more parents involved. To name just a few examples:

- events are scheduled sensitively according to parents' needs
- events are offered that pertain to students' and parents' lives (financial aid workshops, etc.)
- individual teachers make efforts to include parents in student work, class projects, etc.

Generally, however, parental involvement remains low or even non-existent at City High.

In summary, if one compares the tales of parent involvement at the two schools described here, the following observations can be made:

1. Parental involvement differs drastically in both degree and nature not only between schools but also within schools.

2. It has to be recognized that parents may be involved in different ways, including "silent" encouragement at home of their children's educational activities.

3. A high degree of parental involvement does not necessarily mean that the relationships between parents and educators are healthy, or generally perceived as productive. Suburban High serves as a good example of a school with a generally high degree of parental involvement, and yet both parents and teachers frequently described school-community relations as difficult or strained.

4. What Suburban High and City High school have in common, it seems, is that the decisive factor in shaping parental involvement is whether or not the community feels a sense of ownership over its own school. If parents possess such a sense of ownership--as in the case of Suburban High--they tend to make use of it: they become more highly involved and they try to get the school to do what they want it to do. Since few--if any--communities are completely homogenous, a high level of involvement can also easily lead to a variety of frictions and tensions--among parents as well as between parents and educators.

In the case of City High, on the other hand, feelings of ownership are lacking altogether. Here the problem is not so much the kind of parental involvement, or the consequences of a particular kind of parental involvement--as in the case of

Suburban High--than the fact that parental involvement is basically non-existent.

The question arises what, then, possibly helps generate--or alternatively stifles--a sense of ownership among parents? How and why do some parents manage to "make schools their own" and to become effective advocates, which includes exerting pressure on the school to provide their children with the best possible education, while others do not?

One explanation that can be derived from this study concerns the degree to which parents perceive their school to be a viable path toward economic stability and upward mobility. If they do--as is the case at Suburban High--parents become highly involved in school. If they do not--as seems predominantly the case at City High--parents generally refrain from active (or at least visible) school involvement.

5. The implications of this study are that any recommendations for educational practitioners and policy makers alike benefit from being context specific and concrete, taking the differences in degree and type of parental involvement--both within and among schools--into account. Parent communities, for instance, are not monolithic even if parents are characterized by a similar socio-economic and racial background.

In order to foster both quantity and quality of parental involvement at a given institution, school administrators are encouraged to first assess the specific strengths and weaknesses,

barriers and enablers of parental involvement at their school.

Furthermore, this study suggests considering a differentiation between short-term and long-term goals to be achieved in order to improve parental involvement. Short term recommendations encompass such improvements as providing a parent meeting space at school, introducing voice mail and other devices in order to facilitate school-home communication, scheduling events sensitively to parents' schedules and needs, providing transportation to parents in order to enable them to attend events, etc.

Long-term recommendations pertain, for instance, to strengthening the ties between the school and the community. This includes bringing the community into the schools as well as teachers and administrators into the community (home visits, church visits, community centers, etc.), collaboration between schools, social service agencies and churches, as well as rethinking school districts and zoning, taking the important functions that schools have for their communities into account.

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